



BOSNIA-HERCEGOVINA

ELECTION RESULTS SIGNAL VOTER FRUSTRATION, NOT RETURN TO NATIONALISM

It has been said that one of the things that prevents Bosnia and Hercegovina (BiH) from moving forward is its inability to agree on its past and to learn from it. This appears to be the case in the aftermath of the October 5, 2002 general elections. Myths and misinterpretations of the election results are now driving coalition negotiations and public and international reaction.

BiH politicians, party leaders and the international community cannot allow the next four years of government to be shaped by the post-election spin of nationalist parties or the simple headlines of international newspapers. To do so will lead to a new government out of step with the majority of its people and with foreign governments and international investors otherwise supportive of Bosnia's modernization and European integration.

It is clearly the case that moderate political forces did not win these elections, particularly in the Federation entity and at the state level where incumbent moderates lost power. Yet it is clearly not the case that nationalist parties scored a big political victory. Below are key points to understanding the election's outcomes.

Nationalist Parties Saw Drop in Actual Votes

BiH citizens did not vote to return nationalist parties and politicians to power. Bosnia has not returned to the politics of 1991. The October 5th election results were an expression of frustration with government, politicians and the ruling elite - domestic and international alike. The fact is that fewer people than ever voted for the main nationalist parties—the Serbian Democratic Party (SDS), the Croatian Democratic Forum (HDZ), and Party of Democratic Action (SDA - Bosniak).

Rather, they voted for moderate, opposition parties - such as the Party for Independent Social Democrats (SNSD) in the Republika Srpska or People's Party (NS) in Bosnian-Croat majority areas. In the case of Bosniaks, for whom no major moderate opposition party existed, people chose not to vote rather than vote nationalist.

The evidence of this is clear and overwhelming. In the Republika Srpska National Assembly (RSNA) and the Federation parliamentary elections, the four major nationalist

parties collectively lost more than 92,000 votes from the last elections in November 2000.

- SDS lost 67,062 votes in the RSNA elections (however, the Serbian Radical Party, banned from participating in the 2000 elections, garnered 22,396 votes);
- HDZ lost 38,617 votes in the Federation Parliamentary elections; and
- SDA lost almost 9,000 votes. 11,000 fewer people voted SDA in the Republika Srpska, and in the Federation parliamentary elections, the SDA increased its vote by a mere 2,249 votes from the 2000 elections.

Hardly the massive swing to nationalism portrayed by some parties and international media.

It is true that, for the first time since 1996, the percentage of nationalists elected to the BiH parliament, the Federation parliament, and the RSNA has increased, from 46 percent in 2000 to 48 percent in 2002. However, these percentages fall far short of the massive nationalist election victories of 1991 and 1996. What's more, understanding the reasons why more nationalists were elected is critical to understanding the current political and social situation in Bosnia.

Voter Turnout a Decisive Factor, Particularly among Bosniaks

The increased number of nationalists elected in BiH comes entirely from the SDA. By analyzing the Federation Parliament election we can understand exactly how the SDA managed an increase in mandates and in percentage of vote. In a word: turnout.

While SDA voters turned out on October 5 in virtually the same numbers as in November 2000, almost 137,000 voters in the predominantly Bosniak Federation stayed home - 133,000 of whom had voted for either the moderate, incumbent Social Democratic Party (SDP) or its putative ally, the Party of Bosnia-Herzegovina (SBiH) in 2000. These two parties were the largest members of the outgoing moderate government.

Bosniaks did not turn to the SDA but rather chose *en masse* not to vote on October 5, allowing the SDA and its partner, the HDZ, the opportunity to back into power. Quite simply Bosniaks did not give the SDA an election victory; rather, by not voting they allowed it to happen.

This conclusion is supported both anecdotally and by pre-election research conducted by the National Democratic Institute. NDI conducted a nine-month public opinion research program in the run-up to the October 5th elections, including daily tracking polls in the final month of the campaign. For the most part research findings were consistent with the final outcome of the elections - the exception being support for parties with a principally Bosniak voter base.

The findings of NDI research completed on September 30, six days before the election, were accurate within the 3 percent margin of error on virtually every party's final result

in the Republika Srpska and among parties with a mainly ethnic Croat voter base. In reviewing actual election results and comparing them to the results in November 2000, it is clear that people who did not vote in the RS and in Bosnian-Croat majority areas crossed all demographic lines and party loyalties. Therefore, the results were very close to the ones anticipated in pre-election polls.

This was not the case among Bosniak voters. Forty-five percent of eligible voters in the Federation, where most Bosniaks reside, did not vote on Election Day. SDA was the only major party to maintain its number of votes for the Federation Parliament between November 2000 and October 2002.

If the 45 percent of voters who did not vote are removed from the pool of poll respondents who identified parties other than the SDA as the party they would vote for, then we can test the assumption that turnout was the principal factor in SDA's election day success. When this adjustment is done, SDA's polling number increases to 32 percent of respondents while the moderate, incumbent parties, the Social Democratic Party (SDP) and Party of Bosnia-Herzegovina (SBiH) drop to within actual levels of support received on Election Day. With the exception of traditional SDA voters, Bosniaks chose not to vote rather than vote nationalist.

By comparison, where there was a moderate opposition choice, for example in Republika Srpska and ethnic Croat areas of the Federation, voters chose these moderate parties in record numbers.

Why did SDA voters turn out in virtually the same numbers as in last election? There are several reasons. SDA voter support is solid. Since 1991, the SDA has developed the bond and sense of loyalty with its voters that moderate parties have failed to do. The SDA is well organized and its vote is principally rural, making it easier to deliver on Election Day. The SDA ran a focused campaign with a simple message "It's a tough time to be Muslim in Bosnia, Europe and the World. We have to stick together." The party successfully exploited fears of other major ethnic groups and ironically is now entering a coalition with the nationalist parties it told its voters to fear. The SDA also successfully exploited the war on terror and arrests, deportations and detentions of Muslims in Bosnia. These issues did not drive voters to the SDA as they may have in the past; however, they did serve to strengthen the resolve of the party's traditional base to vote. And in an election where urban reformers were staying home, traditional SDA voters were all that was needed to bring the party back to power.

Incumbent Moderates Did Not Motivate Their Voters

That moderate Bosniaks stayed away from the polls and allowed the SDA to regain its status as the largest party in the country will be the subject of great debate as we confront a disappointing election result. The adage -"A defeat of this size is clearly a team effort"- comes to mind.

We need to look within the Alliance for Change, the incumbent coalition of governing parties led by the Social Democratic Party. Although the Alliance parties did not run as a coalition, they were for the most part judged on the basis of the government's record - in particular the SDP and the SBiH as the largest coalition partners. The Alliance parties failed to convince enough voters to vote for them for three reasons: communications, style and solidarity.

Under the Alliance government, in some 18 months of power, significant progress was made on a number of economic, social and political issues. This stands in marked contrast to the lack of achievement of nationalist governments between 1996 and 2000. However, these accomplishments were poorly communicated and time was insufficient for people to feel the direct impact on their lives. The Alliance was unable to present or communicate a unified vision of the Bosnia and Hercegovina's future or the program necessary to get it there.

In style, the Alliance demonstrated little difference from previous governments. This was particularly visible regarding government spoils and related corruption. At the outset much time and public focus was on which Alliance party and which individual controlled state companies, ministries and jobs. Some Alliance members complained publicly that their party members were not getting powerful or well paying enough positions.

Corruption continually polled as the second most important issue among Bosniak voters. Only the economy was seen as more important. While few objective observers would accuse the Alliance of corruption remotely close to the levels of the nationalist governments of 1996 to 2000, many voters were frustrated that no direct action or arrests were made related to government and political corruption. In 18 months of government not a single high-profile politician or public official from this administration or the previous one was arrested - a fact that was exploited by opposition parties and media to demonstrate that there was little difference between moderate and nationalist politicians.

These problems were magnified in the months leading up to the election when the Alliance members themselves started publicly criticizing the Alliance. Threats to withdraw from the Alliance by junior members and direct attacks on the SDP by the SBiH, undermined voter confidence in the Alliance. SDP infighting, including high profile defections to other Alliance parties and public attacks on the party leader by senior party members during the campaign, crippled the SDP and in particular its ability to communicate an effective election message through the media.

In short, the Alliance failed to excite or motivate its voters. In the 18 months it held power, it failed to build a bond or sense of loyalty with its supporters strong enough to bring them to the polls and provide the Alliance and its member parties an opportunity to continue governing.

International Community a Contributing Factor in Stalling Moderate Turnout

The International Community did not play a decisive role in the outcome of the elections. It did, however, contribute to an environment that made it easier for moderate voters to stay home. While some will be critical of the IC's pre-election agenda that forced the Alliance to deal with issues that no western government would address on the eve of an election, its communication on the IC's post-election agenda that may have caused some moderate voters to choose not to vote.

In the months and weeks before the election the International Community, principally through the High Representative, unveiled a political, economic and legal reform agenda for the country. This program was endorsed and adopted by the Alliance for Change. The IC message: Elect reformers and reform will come easier. Elect nationalists and reform will be more difficult but make no mistake, reform will happen. Reform voters stayed home knowing reform would happen with or without their votes. Regardless of the election outcome the nationalists would not be allowed to drag the country backwards. Slow it down, yes, but the IC would not allow them to stop it.

As early election results came in and indicated that nationalists were positioned to regain power, we had conversations with moderate voters in Sarajevo. Many were angry or depressed and talked of leaving, but none had bothered to vote. What is their responsibility?

SDA, HDZ and SDS are in a position to regain power in Bosnia and Hercegovina. Whether or not they regain power or what they do with it will be determined in closed-door negotiations. At the center of these negotiations will be two men: Mladen Ivanic in the RS and Haris Silajdzic of the SBiH. Both are seen to lead moderate parties, and both have a history of partnership with nationalists. It is important that these men and all those involved in these negotiations look closely at the election results and the message they send.

The people of BiH have not voted for a return to nationalist government and nationalist policies. Rather, voters have expressed their frustrations with political institutions and politicians whom they believe to be self-motivated and that have let their people down. Most of the people negotiating the new coalitions have for a long time been at the center of the system that voters see as failed, including Ivanic for two years and Silajdzic for most of the last 10 years. This is their opportunity to show that the political elites of BiH have learned something from October 5.